

Essay on Elimination of 'Female Fetus'

The Murder of Unborn Girls

"In India, we have inherited the cultural legacy of having strong son preference among all communities, religious groups, and citizens of varied socioeconomic backgrounds. Patrilocality, patrilineage, and patriarchal attitudes manifest in women and girls having a subordinate position in the family, discrimination in property rights, and low paid or unpaid jobs. Women's work is limited to household duties. At the time of marriage, dowry is given by the bride's family to the groom for shouldering 'the burden of the bride. In many communities as a custom female babies are killed immediately after birth either by the mother or by elderly women of the family to relieve themselves from the life of humiliation, rejection, and suffering."

Social discrimination against women results in systematic neglect of women's health, from the womb to the tomb. Female infanticide and female foeticide are widely practiced in many States. The overall sex ratio, at present, is favorable to women in Kerala. But in Kerala also, in the 0-6 age group, the sex ratio was 963 as per the 2001 census. Out of a total 36.5 lakh, 0-6 Age group population 18.6 lakhs were male babies and 17.9 lakhs female babies. Thus, 79760 female babies and infants were missing in 2001 in Kerala. This masculinization of sex ratio is a result of selective abortion of female fetuses after the use of ultrasound techniques of sex determination.

The reason for female infanticide can be linked with the evil of dowry, hypergamy, prevailing in our society. A more degrading and

disparaging feature of society has seen existing for the last two decades is the immense love for male children and the elimination of female fetuses. With the invention of new technologies to monitor the foetus health, it was expected to be used for taking care of the health of the unborn child but became terminator of a female fetus. Are female fetus being deliberately eliminated or aborted, is the question? To a great extent, yes! is the answer.

Are the technologies (ultrasonography, amniocentesis, chorion villi biopsy, foetoscopy, maternal serum analysis, etc.) assisting in elimination? Again the answer is; yes, to a great extent.

The answer is well supported by the trends that surfaced in the 2001 Census. The following statistics reveal the truth:

Census	Girl child/ male child ratio in 0-6 age group
1981	962 Girls/1000 Boys
1991	945 Girls/1000 Boys
2001	927 Girls/1000 Boys

Biologically girls are stronger and with all the thrust on the well-being of the girl child, the 1981 trends should have at least continued, but in the past 20 years, the ratio has dropped considerably.

While there can be no moral or ethical justification for foeticide still, it continues to be practiced. In fact, sex determination which was mainly restricted to metros only now is prevalent in villages as

well. If sex determination tests are allowed to proliferate, and the elimination of female fetuses allowed, society should be ready to pay for this sin, after around two decades.

The greatest supporters of a child (whether male or female) are the natural parents. If a girl has a father who loves her and grants all her fundamental rights that girl is inviolable. Fathers often provide material comforts but deny daughters their right to choose their life partner. A few lines from a poem come to the mind when one thinks of the way a girl fears her father—

*Oh, haste, thee haste, the lady cries
Though tempests round us gather
I will face the raging of the skies But not an angry father.*

(From Lord Ullin's Daughter)

For a daughter, there can be no greater misery, than to know that her father does not support her. If she was an unwanted child, the despair is compounded. To go through life and realize that she was thrust on her unwilling parents, is a fate much worse than death. What can be more disgracing than the feeling of nothing more than a contraceptive failure?

Some months back, Delhi University Students and teachers came out of their classrooms to support the amendment to the Pre-Natal Diagnostic (PNDT) Bill which was tabled in Parliament, recommending more stringent measures against doctors who selectively abort female fetuses.

The amended PNDT Bill suggests certain important modifications in the existing 1994 PNDT Act which make it mandatory not only to register

all kinds of techniques but to maintain records of every such scan. It also enhances the penalties for violation of the act. Of course, a powerful lobby of doctors resisted the amendments.

Since 1979, when the first private sex determination clinic was set up in Punjab, such clinics have proliferated rapidly. By the early eighties, such diagnostic centers had mushroomed even in rural areas, conducting sex determination for a few hundred rupees.

According to Saheli' a Delhi-based women's group, between 1978 and 1982, 78000 female fetuses were aborted. During 1987-88, an estimated 13000 sex determination tests were conducted in seven Delhi clinics only. Today the North. The Western States where such clinics had first appeared to have the lowest sex ratio. Punjab has 793 girls for every 1000 boys, Haryana 820 girls/1000 boys, and Delhi follows with 845 girls/1000 boys.

The decline in the ratio in urban areas is more than twice that in the rural areas. It is true that women should have the right to abort their unwanted fetuses, but if the technology is being used only to eliminate the female fetus, then it should be questionable.

The amendment to PNDT Bill is one of the means towards an end. We must take a nationwide campaign against gender discrimination and inequities. The root cause for the elimination of female fetuses is to be traced unless the evil of forced marriages, dowry, illiteracy among the females are done away with the lives of women will not improve. Banning prenatal sex determination might add a feather in the caps of rights activists; it will not materially improve the lives of women. A social awakening for true respect to the girls is required, a lot of honest hard work with full political 'will' in this field can only solve the problem.